

August 16 Lesson 11 (NIV)

LIVING FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 18:23–35

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2:14–26

JAMES 2:14–26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

KEY VERSE

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. —James 2:26

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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 - A. Speech or Action (vv. 14–16)
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- A. In Word and Deed
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HOW TO SAY IT

AbrahamAy-bruh-ham.

DeuteronomyDue-ter-ahn-uh-me.

JosephusJo-see-fus.

MoriahMo-rye-uh.

RahabRay-hab.

ShemaShe-muh.

Introduction

A. “A Right Strawy Epistle”

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 points of disagreement with medieval Roman Catholic doctrine to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had come to see that Catholicism’s position on the role of works in salvation did not match the apostle Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith.

As debates heated up, the letter of James became more and more a source of frustration for Luther. Representatives of the pope kept quoting it to him in reply to his assertions about justification by faith. By the time Luther published his German translation of the New Testament in the 1520s, he had come to view the letter of James as a “right strawy epistle ... [that] has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”

Luther believed he was justified in this conclusion for three reasons: (1) James seems to contradict Paul, (2) James makes no mention of Jesus' death or resurrection, and (3) James himself wasn't of the same caliber as Paul and other apostles. Consequently, Luther moved James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation from their positions in the Bible at the time and placed them in a separate section at the end of the New Testament.

Luther's attitude about James eventually mellowed. But many Christians still have a hard time reconciling James with Paul on the role of works. Today's lesson revisits this issue in a limited way.

B. Lesson Context

The Lesson Context of lessons 9 and 10 apply here as well, so that information need not be repeated. But before we move into today's text, it will be helpful to consider the larger context of the central idea of today's lesson.

For all the controversy that James 2 has generated on the role of works over the centuries, it can come as a surprise to see how often works are related to salvation elsewhere in Scripture. Consider the scene Jesus paints in Matthew 25:31–46. In the judgment, individual believers are judged on the basis of what they have done or not done—their works.

Also a pointed statement is Revelation 20:12, 13, where the apostle John says he

saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.

As important as that issue is, it's easy to allow it to overshadow something else James stresses: the specific economic needs—the reality of life for so many in the ancient world—that drives much of his thoughts in James 2. The first half of the chapter (verses 1–13) warns against discriminating against the poor in favor of the rich; economic need also is an integral part of his argument regarding faith and works in the second half—today's text.

I. Saving Faith (JAMES 2:14–17)

A. Speech or Action (vv. 14–16)

14. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

The tone of today's text is somewhat combative—James is blunt. He is not a dispassionate scholar who pontificates from an ivory tower on theories of the relationship between faith and works. The phrase *what good is it* intends to discover what benefit can come about, based on the conditions James is about to discuss.

Faith, as James is using the term here, is a kind of confessional faith. It is belief or mental assent to the notion that God exists. Faith in its fullness involves a belief and trust that assume the action of a life lived in obedience to the law of Christ (compare Matthew 7:26; James 1:22–25). For the purposes of James's discussion, though, he's using the word *faith* in a more truncated sense that some of his addressees seem to have adopted.

15. Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

Some commentators have seen this example as comic in its exaggeration. “Surely,” we might say, “no one would be in a position of having no clothing or food whatsoever.” But James may be using overstatement (hyperbole) for effect.

Another possibility is that the word being translated *without clothes* is intended to signify inadequate clothing or a lack of proper clothing. The same word is used to describe Peter’s clothed status before he donned his “outer garment” in John 21:7 (compare Matthew 25:36). *Daily food*, for its part, echoes the need noted in Matthew 6:11 and 25:35.

16. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

The callousness of the words spoken here comes through clearly. But it is possible that the words are even stronger than the English translation indicates. Commentators disagree about which of two possible interpretations of the verbs *keep warm* and [*be*] *well fed* is the correct one. Seen one way, the actions they suggest put the responsibility for finding shelter and food on the poverty-stricken person in the scenario, as in “Go get yourself warmed up and fed.”

Seen another way, these verbs may be an example of what is sometimes called the “divine passive,” in which God is the implied source of the action. In other words, the intent would be “May God warm you and fill you up.”

Either way, the one speaking avoids personal responsibility to act to meet the need (contrast Luke 3:11). Under the second of the two interpretations, he or she goes so far as to provide religious cover for inaction (contrast 1 John 3:17, 18).

B. Alive or Dead (v. 17)

17. In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James draws a conclusion that reiterates and strengthens his original point. The phrase *by itself* reminds us that we are dealing with a definition of *faith* that James is opposing: mere intellectual acknowledgment or mental assent to certain truths about God (contrast Galatians 5:6).

II. Vain Faith

(JAMES 2:18, 19)

A. Demonstrated Belief (v. 18)

18a. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

In the second part of his current line of argument, James describes a hypothetical conversation. A challenge is posed to James’s assertion that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead,” just stated. The first conversationalist seems intent on putting *faith* and *deeds* into categories that do not relate to one another. The person is, in effect, arguing that faith and deeds can be separated without damage to either.

18b. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

There is no demonstrating of *faith without deeds* since faith is invisible in and of itself. But the deeds of which James is speaking are the necessary products of valid faith. Actions really do speak louder than words. The person who claims faith without deeds makes an absurd, empty claim.

It’s possible that James is also opposing here a line of thought that contends that an emphasis on faith by itself is just as acceptable as an emphasis on faith coupled with deeds. James disagrees:

these two options are not equally acceptable since faith and deeds are fundamentally inseparable (compare Hebrews 11). There is no saving faith that does not manifest itself in deeds.

B. Bare Belief (v. 19)

19. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

James presses his point by referring to what is called the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4; the word *Shema* is the transliteration of the first three Hebrew letters of this verse). This is important as we recall that James is writing to Christians of Jewish background. Observant Jews of the time recited the Shema three times daily. Its teaching is still understood to be central to the Law of Moses. Jesus agreed with that assessment when he affirmed it to be the commandment that is above all others (Mark 12:28, 29). But what of the person who simply makes this confession and does nothing more?

James affirms that the confession is correct. But then he points out that *the demons believe* the same thing! They know who God is; they recognized Jesus’ identity. Early in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus encountered a man with an unclean spirit in a synagogue. When the man saw Jesus, the demons within him cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24).

Indeed, there is no confusion among the forces of Satan about who God is and the extent of his power. Because they recognize him, they *shudder*. The person who claims faith without deeds is less responsive to God than a demon!

We might sum up James’s point with the common saying “Talk is cheap.” Claiming to have faith is of no significance at all if we do not act in faith. If demons can at least tremble, should not those who claim to belong to God act in ways that please him?

III. Exemplars of Faith

(JAMES 2:20–26)

A. Abraham (vv. 20–24)

20. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

In characterizing those who oppose his view as *foolish*, James is calling them “empty,” which is how the same word is translated in Luke 1:53. This is strong language, but we have to remember that James is living in a time that sees no problem with strong moral denunciation of those who are, in fact, in the wrong. Behind the uselessness or emptiness of those who cling to a deedless faith lies the attempt to think that God accepts people merely on the basis that they acknowledge his existence. Were that the case, then logic would dictate that demons would be saved!

But James seems to realize that arguments from logic might not convince those who oppose his view. So he proceeds to offer concrete evidence from Jewish history.

21a. Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did

Recalling again that James is writing to an audience of Christians of Jewish background (James 1:1), it is quite proper for him to appeal to an example involving *our father Abraham* (compare Paul’s similar appeal in Romans 4:11, 12, 16; Galatians 3:7, 8, 29.) As we remember that Abraham was *considered righteous for what he did*, we keep in mind the context of James’s remarks of having just said that “faith without deeds is useless.” James asks the question we see here

(continued below) in such a way that it assumes agreement. Of course Abraham was justified by his works! Had he had no faith, there would have been no deeds.

21b. when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

It is also noteworthy that, even though James speaks of Abraham's deeds, he specifically has this one very particular deed in mind. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is told only once in the Old Testament (Genesis 22:1–19), but it had taken on great significance in the Jewish tradition by the first century AD. Rather than, for example, pointing to Abraham's obedience to God's initial call (12:1–5) or some other event, the rabbis constantly point to this particular act as the preeminent example of Abraham's faithfulness. James, who in many ways is safely assumed to be an observant first-century Jew, is certainly familiar with this tradition. So he draws on it here.

22a. You see that his faith and his actions were working together,

When James says Abraham's *faith and his actions were working together*, he is saying that the man's faith functioned in tandem with his actions (see Hebrews 11:17). Again, the kernel of James's argument in this section is that faith and actions are inseparable. They commingle in such a way that Paul speaks of the "work produced by faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

22b. and his faith was made complete by what he did.

James goes further: it is *by what he did* that Abraham's *faith was made complete*. Faith itself is brought to its full realization, its final form, its God-intended purpose when it is working (compare Galatians 5:6). This does not imply flawlessness; instead, it means it is sufficient to do what God desires.

23. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.

The scripture was fulfilled because the faith noted in Genesis 15:6 (the verse quoted) was made visible by the action of Genesis 22:1–10. The importance of Genesis 15:6 is seen in its being quoted four times in the New Testament (here plus Romans 4:3, 22; and Galatians 3:6).

Abraham's obedience to the command of God on Mount Moriah placed him in the class of individuals who are counted righteous, who conform to the standard that God had set forth. For Abraham to be *called God's friend* (also 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8) reinforces what James has already said about the nature of justification.

24. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Is faith alone, a faith that produces no action, a valid option? James says no. Abraham's great deed of faith was a long time in coming, but it demonstrated what God had foreseen: genuine trust in God's promise, trust that Abraham later put on the line. To be counted *righteous* like Abraham, one needs the kind of faith that leads to action. James generalizes from the example of Abraham to reinforce his point.

B. Rahab (vv. 25, 26)

25. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?

We might think it scandalous—or strange, at the least—that James appeals to the example of *Rahab* to make his point. It was already the case in the first century that some had qualms with what Joshua 2 has to say about this woman. (The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, argued that she was not a prostitute, but an innkeeper.) James, however, gives no evidence that he has reservations about appealing to the example of Rahab, even mentioning that she was *the prostitute* (compare Hebrews 11:31) when he could have left that part out.

Justification is not about sinless perfection on the part of the one who is considered *righteous*. Consider, for example, how Abraham himself tried to rush the fulfillment of God's promise by fathering a child with Hagar, Sarah's slave (Genesis 16). Abraham's faith faltered at other times as well; these showed up in his actions. Though he willingly left his home for the land God was to show him, he twice revealed a lack of trust in God when he lied to protect himself (12:11–13; 20:1, 2).

Rahab, like Abraham, was considered righteous on the basis of her faithful deeds—the singular act of harboring the Israelite spies who had entered the city of Jericho. In her hospitality, she provided for Israelites who were in need. In so doing, she set an example of what James calls on his readers to do.

26. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James concludes this portion of his letter with an analogy. The comparison assumes that *the spirit* is the animating, life-giving force in the human body. This concept is found throughout the Old Testament (example: Psalm 31:5), as well as in the New Testament (Luke 8:55; 23:46). The analogy is new in the course of James's argument, but the point is the same as before: faith that makes one righteous cannot be separated from deeds that proceed from it. *Faith without attendant deeds* is no faith at all.

Conclusion

A. In Word and Deed

In popular usage, faith often equates to mere belief, an intellectual acknowledgment of the existence of God. James shows us that true, saving faith goes much deeper than this: it touches every aspect of our lives and guides our every action. The examples that James uses—Abraham and Rahab—highlight these points. Consider that it was not Abraham's mere acknowledgment of God's promise that justified him. Rather, it was his action on the basis of that promise that justified him. Likewise, it was not mere verbal acknowledgment of the Israelites' God that justified Rahab (Joshua 2:8, 9). That acknowledgment went hand in hand with her actions in sheltering Israelite spies from certain death (2:2–4). She undoubtedly risked her own life in doing so.

Certainly, we are saved through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8, 9); we cannot earn salvation by our works (Romans 3:27; 9:32; Galatians 2:16). But what type of faith saves? The type that works. A profession of faith must be accompanied by action; otherwise it is no faith at all. A profession of faith that is unaccompanied by the works God intends we do brings disrepute on the faith we claim to have. Unless the Word is changing us inside and out—in heart and mind to speak *and* act—our faith will be no faith at all.

B. Prayer

Father, may our faith in you not be limited to a mere affirmation of your existence. Instead, may it be manifested in the way we live, including the way we extend help to those in need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith with no works is no faith at all.¹
